

Customhouse and Post Office, now
Christiansted Library
South side Christiansted Wharf Square,
at foot of Hospital Street
Christiansted National Historic Site
Christiansted
St. Croix
Virgin Islands

HABS No. VI-4

HABS
VI
1-CHRIS,
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

CUSTOMHOUSE AND POST OFFICE,
NOW CHRISTIANSTED LIBRARYHABS
VI
1-CHRIS,

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Address: South side Christiansted Wharf Square, at foot of Hospital Street; Christiansted National Historic Site, Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands.

Present Owner: Government of the Virgin Islands.

Present Occupant and Use: Christiansted Library

Statement of Significance: Christiansted, as the chief port of St. Croix, was an important trading center in the 18th and 19th centuries; it exported large quantities of sugar, rum, and molasses. This building, which was the Christiansted Customs House from the 1760's to 1878, was therefore of considerable importance to the economic life of the community, and is now preserved as part of the Christiansted National Historic Site.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Government of the Danish West Indies to 1917. Government of the Virgin Islands since.
2. Dates of erection and architects: Part of the ground floor of the building dates back to 1751-52. The remainder of the ground floor built 1805, Fr. von Meley, architect. Second story built 1828-30, Johannes von Magens, architect; subsequently modified 1840-42, Albert Lövmund, architect.

- B. Supplemental Material: The history of this building has been studied in detail by National Park Service Historian Herbert Olsen, primarily through documentary material in the Danish and American National Archives. The following information on the building has been extracted from his Historic Structures Report, Part I, Library Building (Old Danish Customs House and Post Office), August 1961, copies at Virgin Islands National Park Headquarters, St. Thomas, and Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction, National Park Service, 143 South Third Street, Philadelphia:

SYNOPSIS OF GENERAL HISTORY

- 1734-38 Sometime during this era, a one story, half-timbered warehouse measuring about 50 feet by 20 feet was erected in the wharf area of Christiansted by the Danish West India and Guinea Company.
- 1742 A two story, half-timbered, shingled house was built next to the warehouse as a residence for the bookkeeper of the Danish West India and Guinea Company.
- 1751 The Privy Council of St. Croix decided to remove the second floor of the bookkeeper's house and to enlarge the ground floor in masonry.
- 1751-52 A new house was constructed for the bookkeeper next to the warehouse. Records indicate that it was one story high; was built of "Bermudes Steen", a form of sandstone imported from Bermuda; had a shingled roof; measured approximately 42 feet by 19 feet externally; and had several buildings.
- 1765 The Governor General of the Danish West Indies and the Privy Council of St. Croix proposed to the Danish State Government that a new customs house be built to replace the existing and dilapidated one. This is the first time that the "bookkeeper's" residence is referred to as the "customs house".
- 1768 The Danish State Government approved the construction of a new customs house in Christiansted. However, even though materials for its construction were bought in 1769, it was never built.
- 1798-99 An arcade having six brick pillars was added to the north side of the customs house, thereby increasing ground floor dimensions to 42 feet by 29 feet. A new shingled roof with one large and four small dormers facing north-south was laid on the building. Other renovations, including an exterior stairway and platform to the second floor, increased alteration costs to 4,400 Rigsdalers.
- 1802 Efforts to repair the old warehouse proved fruitless when it collapsed, and the building was completely torn down and removed from the site.
- 1805 A new warehouse matching the customs house in design was built next to the customs house by Thomas and John Aylmer at a cost of 8,500 Rigsdalers. The customs house was reshingled and the platform of the exterior stairway was altered to conform to that of the new warehouse.

- 1823 The wooden second story of the customs house was reported to be in danger of falling down. The colonial government submitted a request to the home government for authorization to rebuild the second story in brick.
- 1828-29 Customs Treasurer Testmann was awarded a contract to rebuild the second story of the customs house for the sum of \$5,625 Danish West Indies currency. The wooden second stories of both the customs house and the adjoining warehouse were removed. A new brick second story measuring about 60 feet by 30 feet by 14 feet, with parapet, was erected. A flat brick roof was laid over the remaining one story area of the warehouse, which was also somewhat shortened and squared off in the process. Although not included in the original plans and contract, an extension of about 26 feet by 10 feet was built on the north side of the customs house, and access to the second story was provided by means of a stairway erected on the east side of this extension.
- 1840-42 The colonial government decided to convert the second floor of the customs house from a residence for the customs treasurer into offices for the customs service. The exterior stairway on the east side of the northern extension of the building was torn down and replaced by the existing stairway on the north side of the extension. The remaining one story section of the 1805 warehouse was torn down and removed. All outbuildings and enclosures around the customs house were torn down. Sunshades were erected on the east, south, and west sides of the building, and a picket fence was put up between the wooden supports of the sunshades.
- 1847 A new flat brick roof was laid on the building by Carpenter G. Meyer, and interior finishes in the second story were completely redone because of water damage.
- 1902-03 Sometime during this period, a sloping corrugated metal roof was laid over the existing flat brick roof, and the height of the parapet was consequently doubled to hide the alteration.
- 1926-27 The post office moved to other quarters, and the building was converted into a library.
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GENERAL CONSTRUCTION DATA

Building Inspector von Meley submitted the requested plans and estimates for a new warehouse to the colonial government in April 1803, and they were sent to the home government for approval. However, the home government refused to approve the plans because they

called for an expenditure of 9,768 rigsdalers, which was thought to be excessive. Von Meley was called upon to prepare a new set of plans and specifications for the warehouse, therefore, and this time they were approved by the home government at an estimated cost of 7,926 rigsdalers. The contract for the construction of the building was subsequently awarded to Thomas and John Aylmer on April 17, 1805, for the sum of 7,000 rigsdalers.

Comparison of von Meley's plans of 1803 and 1804 indicate that he achieved the cost reduction in his second set of plans and estimates primarily by eliminating dormers from the roof of the warehouse. However, while the building was under construction, the customs inspector and the broker, who were to occupy the attic offices, objected to the lack of dormers on the grounds that their offices would be unbearably hot. These officials agreed to pay 1,500 rigsdalers out of their own pockets for the construction of dormers. As a result, the facade of the new warehouse, when completed in September 1805, matched the customs house in appearance. . . .

. . . on April 29, 1823, when the Building Commission conducted its annual inspection of public buildings, the second story of the customs house was found to be in such poor condition that it was feared that it would fall down in a heavy storm, to say nothing of a hurricane. The commission recommended that the second story be torn down and replaced by a masonry second story measuring 45 feet by 30 feet by 12 feet, inclusive of a parapet around a flat brick roof. The existing masonry pillars of the arcade were to be arched over to bear the north wall of the new second story.

In view of the expense involved in the commission's proposal, the colonial government submitted it to the home government for approval. More than a year and a half elapsed before the home government replied, and then it was to complain that the proposal was not clear enough and to request that detailed plans and estimates be submitted for approval.

Building Inspector von Magens was ordered by the colonial government on July 13, 1825, to prepare three sets of plans and specifications for the following: (1) a masonry second story on the customs house as a residence for the customs treasurer and removal of the remainder of the wooden second story on the warehouse, which was to be covered with a flat roof; (2) a masonry second story on the customs house and retention of the wooden second story of the warehouse; and (3) a new wooden second story on the customs house and retention of the wooden second story of the warehouse.

Magens prepared the necessary plans and specifications and submitted them to the colonial government on September 7, 1825, and, in turn, they were transmitted to the home government on January 24, 1826. The latter approved the first of Magens' proposals, and

Governor General Peter von Scholten so informed Magens on December 14, 1827. The contract was subsequently awarded to Customs Treasurer Testmann on March 19, 1828, for the sum of \$5,625.42 Danish West Indies currency, mainly because Testmann offered to build the second story about 10 feet longer than called for in the plans and estimates at no extra cost to the government.

Like the 1823 proposal for the rebuilding of the second story, Magens' plans provided for the erection of a brick masonry second story measuring 45 feet by 30 feet by 12 feet, inclusive of a parapet around a flat brick roof laid on pitch pine beams and lath. To permit the erection of the north wall, the existing pillars of the arcade were to be arched over. An exterior brick stairway was to be erected on the north side of the building to provide access to the second story; and the stairway was to be supported on two arches, have a 10-foot-square platform at the top, and be provided with a masonry railing.

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Construction of the new second story and completion of the other alterations called for was finished by February 1830. However, the completed building differed in some important respects from von Magens' plans.

First, the new second story was actually almost 60 feet long, or 15 longer than proposed, which meant that some 17 feet of the ground floor walls of the warehouse erected in 1805 were incorporated into the new two story customs house. This alteration in the plans must also have made it necessary to erect a masonry wall or pillars in the ground floor of the warehouse to support the west end wall of the second story.

Secondly, because of the lengthening of the second story, the exterior stairway and platform on the north side of the building was not built as proposed. Instead, the existing extension was built in its present dimensions, and a brick stairway was erected to a door in the east side of the extension.

Thirdly, the warehouse section was shortened and squared off at its western end.

Fourthly, the number of windows and doors in the walls of the second story was changed.

No sooner had the new second story been built that the flat brick roof began to leak, and it was found necessary to cover it with an elastic compound.

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On August 31, 1840, the colonial government ordered the building inspector to prepare a plan for the conversion of the second story

residence into customs offices, and the building inspector's recommendations were carried out by Architect Albert Lovmand between November 1840 and May 1842. The exterior brick stairway on the east side of the extension was torn down and replaced by the existing brick stairway on the north side of the building and extension. Wooden sunshades were erected on the east, south, and west sides of the building, and a wooden picket fence was erected between the upright posts which supported the sunshades. The roof was repaired and ceiling boards were removed in the second story so that roof leaks could be more readily detected. Glass windows were installed in all second floor windows which faced east and south. The new offices in the second floor were papered. A masonry partition was erected in the ground floor to create an additional room. The one story remainder of the warehouse attached to the west end of the customs house was torn down. All outbuildings -- kitchen, servants' quarters, etc. -- were also torn down, since they were no longer necessary now that the second story was to be used for offices; and the brick walls and wooden fences which had formerly enclosed the customs house yard were torn down. In virtually all essentials, therefore, the customs house had emerged as the free-standing, two story masonry building seen today in Christiansted.

In 1843, the building was appraised at \$3,840 Danish West Indies currency.

As early as 1844, the flat brick roof was found to be leaking.

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The contract for the new roof was awarded to Carpenter G. Meyer on March 11, 1847, who completed the job by June 17. Subsequently, Meyer also redecorated the interior of the second floor, which had been damaged by incoming water.

The subsequent history of the customs house is largely one of routine maintenance and minor alterations. However, in 1902-03, the flat brick roof was leaking so badly that a corrugated metal roof was laid over it. This alteration made it necessary to raise the height of the parapet several feet in order to conceal the new roof.

USE

Throughout the history of the building, the ground floor rooms have been used as offices, residence, and storerooms by the Book-keeper of the Danish West India and Guinea Company, the Customs Department of the colonial government (including the ship's broker, the treasurer, the inspector, and the postal service), the Building Inspector of the colonial government, various offices of the Virgin Islands Government after 1917, and more recently by the St. Croix Museum, Inc., for exhibit purposes.

The second story was used as a residence until 1841, at which time it was converted into offices for the Customs Department. In 1878 the post office was moved from the first to the second floor, where it occupied most of the offices until 1926. In the following year, the second floor was converted to use as a public library.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
August 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The construction and the plan are typical of many of the buildings in the island. The heavy masonry walls with characteristic arcades, bands and keystones are repeated here. The plan has a gallery and arcades in front of the main rooms. Of note is the treatment of the parapet wall, both old and recent sections, with broken bands at ascending levels over the main door, second floor. The first floor contains 18th century masonry walls; the building, however, was enlarged and considerably changed during the early 19th century and in its present form has the architectural character of the later period. It contains many of the finishes and details from the early 19th century rebuilding.
2. Condition of fabric: The general exterior condition of the building is fair. The masonry except for some flaking of stucco is sound. The roof leaks and has caused some deterioration along the rear interior wall. The floor boards are badly infested with termites and in need of repair.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: Two stories; rectangle with gallery and grand staircase--40' x 60' (plus grand staircase).
2. Foundations: The foundation is assumed to be of the same material and construction as the walls.
3. Wall construction: The walls and piers are of masonry rubble and brick, 1'-6" to 2'-0" thick. The system of support from front to rear consists of the staircase with two arched passageways, the forward three-bay arcade supporting the second-floor gallery, the seven-bay main arcade supporting the front wall, the rear wall of the arcade supporting the interior masonry wall on the second floor and the rear and end walls. All the walls of the main rectangle and forward gallery have a continuous parapet wall. Eight feet out from the sides and rear wall are wooden columns every eight feet, two stories

- high supporting a wooden and metal shed roof. A picket fence encloses the space between the posts.
4. Openings: The entire front elevation of the building has corresponding openings on the second floor to the seven bays of the arcade. On the remaining side there is no regularity to the placement of openings.
 - a. Doors: On the first floor there are three doors under the gallery. The second floor has its main door at the top of the grand staircase and a door-window in its rear wall. All doors have two-ply shutters, with the main door (second floor) having in addition a two-wing paneled door. The door-window has a metal grill in the lower half.
 - b. Windows and shutters: The windows on the second-floor gallery are window-doors with exterior shutters, wooden railings, and interior paneled shutters over the bottom third. The remainder of the windows have their sill at the level of the chair rail of the wainscoting. On the first floor the windows are unglazed with the exception of two casements in the rear wall; one opening is barred. On the second floor, openings in the east room have casement windows, some in the gallery area have casement windows, as do those on the north side of the west room.
 5. Roof: The building has two relatively flat roof systems. The original one is beneath the present one, being no higher at its ridge than the level of the intermediate band on the parapet. The present sheet-metal roof is higher, and the parapet wall was raised to its existing level when the second roof was added. The original roof is brick on wooden sheathing on wooden purlins on 14" beams, the underside of which can be seen on the second floor. Both roofs were built with the ridge line across the northern edge (front) of the main rectangular section. The major part of the roof slopes to the rear, where there are six drains. The pitch of the roof is 1:7. The shed roof on three sides is sheet metal over a wooden frame. On the east side two gutters lead to a single leader which empties into the underground cistern to the east of the building.
 6. Masonry bands and decorations: Two continuous horizontal bands circle the building at the second-floor level, and follow the slope of the main stair on the exterior sides of the brick stair rails. The arches on the ground floor have capital bands at the spring point and projecting plaster keystones connected to the lower of the two bands mentioned above. All second-story window openings have

a projecting keystone except for the window on the north-east side of the projecting outer section which has a triangular pediment. A molded cornice divides the wall area from the parapet. The parapet wall has two horizontal bands. The bays of the building are articulated by projecting pilasters above the cornice. The central bay of the parapet of the projecting center section is slightly "stepped" up.

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plan; first floor: Behind the double arcade, the floor is divided into four rooms. The second floor has four rooms, one in the gallery area and three across the remainder.
2. Stairways: The exterior grand staircase is flared with stuccoed solid masonry balustrades and brick steps. It ranges from 22' wide at the bottom to 6' at the landing. The balustrades are terminated by masonry drums supporting lanterns. An interior wooden stairs is located against the west end wall. At one time an exterior stair led down from the door-window in the rear wall.
3. Floors: The floors are all of wood; the landing to the stairs is concrete over brick; the area under the arcade is brick pavement.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The interior masonry walls are plastered and have a wooden wainscoting on the second floor. The wooden walls are sheathing on exposed studs, or plasterboard. The exterior walls are stuccoed and painted yellow. All ceilings consist of exposed beams and sheathing.
5. Openings: On the second floor there are three openings in the wall between the front or gallery room and the middle rear one: a window and two doorways with deep molded frames. On the first floor all doors and doorways have been heavily modified.
6. Trim: Interior trim consists of the molded window and door frames, the wainscoting, and moldings around the beaded ceiling beams.
7. Hardware: The hardware includes examples of wrought iron and brass fixtures; bars, sliding bolts, hasps, hooks, strap hinges, HL hinges, brass door latches, circle pulls and spring locks. Of note is a bar arrangement for securing shutters with metal straps fitted into slots in the window frame.

8. Lighting: The building is wired for electricity. The two lanterns flanking the staircase are wrought iron, and wired; otherwise, the building has modern electrical fixtures.

D. Site

1. Orientation and general setting: The Library faces north; it is a rectangle with the middle three bays on the north or front side brought forward one bay to form a gallery. A large flared masonry stairway leads down from the second floor central door of this gallery. The Arcade extends under the gallery and is one-bay deep along the entire front side, forming a double arcade at the central three bays. The building is situated in the center of the Christiansted National Historic Site in Hamilton Jackson Park. In front of it is the harbor and parking lot, to the west is Hospital Street, to the south is the Park and to the east, Fort Christiansvaern.
2. Enclosures: The wooden picket fence that encircles the building on three sides encloses a small area to the east over the cistern.
3. Landscaping: On either side of the staircase there are small grassed plots with small palms.

Prepared by Frederik C. Gjessing, Architect
and

J. Michael Everett, Architect
National Park Service
July 1960